

**AN EVALUATION OF THE
POLICE DEPARTMENT'S VICTIM ASSISTANCE UNIT**

**OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT REPORT 2006-8
SEPTEMBER 25, 2006**

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) established a Victim Assistance Unit five years ago to provide crime victims and witnesses with crisis intervention and other support services. Between July 2002 and May 2006, the Unit reports working with crime victims and witnesses of nearly 35,000 cases. About 75% of the 22,000 referrals made to other programs were to the Victim Assistance and Sexual Assault Program (VASAP) or the Abused Persons Program.

In sum, the Office of Legislative Oversight's evaluation found that the Victim Assistance Unit has successfully addressed each of the "barriers to service" identified in 2001 as the impetus for establishing the Unit. OLO's survey of 600 crime victims served by the Unit during this past year yielded a relatively low response rate (8.4%), which is consistent with other surveys of crime victims. However, 71% of those who did respond expressed that they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the services received from the Unit.

OLO's recommends four issues for Council discussion: (1) Lessons learned from OLO's survey of the Unit's clients. (2) Opportunities for further coordination among victim services programs. (3) Results of the Unit's referrals to the Abused Persons Program and VASAP. (4) The status of work being accomplished by the Victim Services Task Force.

THE ASSIGNMENT

At the County Council's request, the Office of Legislative Oversight evaluated the Victim Assistance Unit of the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD), with a focus on how Unit staff identify victims, manage its caseload, and coordinate with other programs. The Council explicitly requested that OLO's study include feedback from a sample of crime victims who received services from the Unit.

VICTIM ASSISTANCE UNIT - STRUCTURE, STAFFING, AND SERVICES

The Victim Assistance Unit is part of the Police Department's Major Crimes Division. The Unit's FY07 staffing consists of a full-time director and eight full-time victim advocates. One advocate is assigned to the Family Crimes Division while the other seven advocates are based in the Police District Stations.

Any victim or witness of a crime committed in the County is eligible to receive services from the Victim Assistance Unit. Family members of crime victims are also eligible. The Victim Assistance Unit's primary strategy for identifying potential clients is to review daily crime and event reports. In addition, officers notify the victim advocates of victims/witnesses in need of assistance, and victims themselves can initiate contact with the Police Department. The services provided by the Victim Assistance Unit vary by the type of crime and the unique needs of individual victims/witnesses.

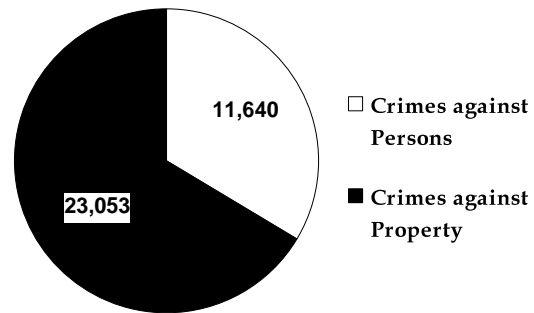
SERVICES OFFERED BY THE POLICE DEPARTMENT'S VICTIM ASSISTANCE UNIT

- Emergency Services
- Referrals
- Case Information and Assistance
- Support Services
- Court-Related Services

VICTIM ASSISTANCE UNIT CASELOAD

The Victim Assistance Unit places priority on serving victims of violent crimes, crimes against persons, and serious or traumatic property crimes. Over the past five years, advocates report working with crime victims/witnesses of nearly 35,000 cases. The Unit's caseload increased annually between 2002 and 2005. About two-thirds of the Unit's total caseload relates to property crimes, and one-third relates to crimes against persons.

Chart 1: Number of Cases, July 2002-May 2006

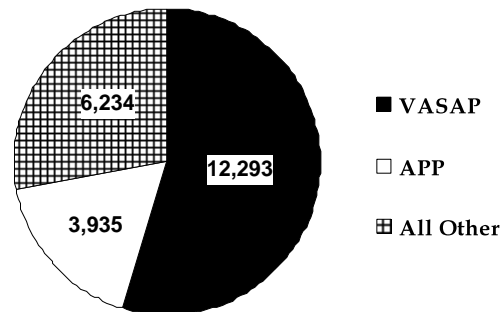


COORDINATION AND SERVICE REFERRALS

The Victim Assistance Unit regularly coordinates services for individual victims/witnesses with other government, private, and non-profit programs. The Unit also participates in on-going victim services collaboration efforts within County Government and with other agencies. An advocate's responsibilities to coordinate services range from simple referrals to more formal inter-agency coordination of multiple services.

Over the past five years, advocates report making nearly 22,500 referrals to other programs/services. The number of referrals made increased annually between 2002 and 2005. Advocates make referrals to one or more programs/services in person, by telephone, and/or as part of an informational packet mailed to a victim. About 55% of all referrals were to the Victim Assistance and Sexual Assault Program (VASAP) and 18% were to the Abused Persons Program (APP).

Chart 2: Number of Referrals, July 2002-May 2006



REFERRAL ACCEPTANCE

Program data indicate that the Victim Assistance Unit is very successful in contacting victims and providing appropriate referrals. However, program data for the past few years also show that 8% of the victims referred by the Unit to APP and 3% of the victims referred by the Unit to VASAP "accept" the referral. Program staff define an "accepted referral" as when the Unit refers a victim to APP or VASAP and the victim contacts that program to inquire about and/or receive services.

Research on victim services indicates that a low rate of accepted referrals is not uncommon because many individuals choose not to take advantage of victim services. According to the research, the most frequent reasons victims decline services are because they receive the help they need from family and friends and/or they do not have the time to get involved with victim services programs.

PERFORMANCE RELATED TO ORIGINAL “BARRIERS TO SERVICE”

In 2001, when MCPD requested funding for a permanent victim services unit, the Department prepared a position paper for the County Council to justify the proposal. MCPD’s position paper described five characteristics of the program structure in place and suggested each case offered an opportunity to improve the delivery of victim services. A review of program data and interviews with staff suggest that the Victim Assistance Unit has addressed, in whole or in part, each of the five “barriers to service.”

• A lack of consistent linkages to appropriate referrals

In 2001, the Police Department stated that, as first responders to a crime scene, its officers and victim advocates can play a critical role in informing victims about the array of County services and providing referrals to access these services. MCPD stated that a referral system in the Department would specifically help make victims aware of the services provided by VASAP and APP.

Current Status: Victim Assistance Unit workload data indicate that the Unit provides the desired referrals. Providing program referrals, however, does not necessarily correlate with victims using those program’s services as indicated by available “accepted referral” data.

• A number of unserved or underserved victims

In 2001, MCPD stated that a victim assistance program located in the Police Department would help address the needs of victims (e.g. victims of property crimes) who did not fall under the purview of other victim services programs that traditionally focused on victims of violent crimes.

Current Status: Victim Assistance Unit caseload data indicates that the Unit has provided services to victims in approximately 23,000 property crime cases between July 2002 and May 2006, which represents 66% of the Unit’s total caseload during that period.

• An inadequate level of trained, professional staff within MCPD

In 2001, MCPD stated that because the staffing level consisted of only one full-time professional victim services coordinator plus volunteers, “only a handful” of the County’s victims of violent crime received any form of outreach from the Police Department, and victims of property crime received only a standard form letter.

Current Status: MCPD now has professionally trained staff providing victim services out of each of the County’s six district police stations. Unit staff report that victims of violent crime and serious or traumatic property crime receive direct outreach within 24 hours of an advocate learning about an incident.

• A high turnover rate and lack of continuity in service

In 2001, MCPD stated the use of volunteer staff created high turnover in personnel and made it difficult to offer continuity of service to victims of the most serious crimes.

Current Status: The implementation of permanent staffing removed the barrier associated with volunteer turnover and service continuity.

• Lack of departmental training regarding victimization and victim’s needs

In 2001, with few staff and high turnover, MCPD reported it had been unable to establish a consistent training program for either new recruits or seasoned officers.

Current Status: MCPD has established a more consistent training procedure for staff related to victims of crime. These include both formal and informal training.

FEEDBACK ON COORDINATION AND SERVICE DELIVERY

OLO sought feedback from a range of stakeholders about the Victim Assistance Unit's coordination and service delivery. Police Department staff outside of the Victim Assistance Unit expressed strong support for the services provided by the Unit as a needed function within MCPD.

COMMON THEMES AMONG THE FEEDBACK FROM POLICE DEPARTMENT STAFF

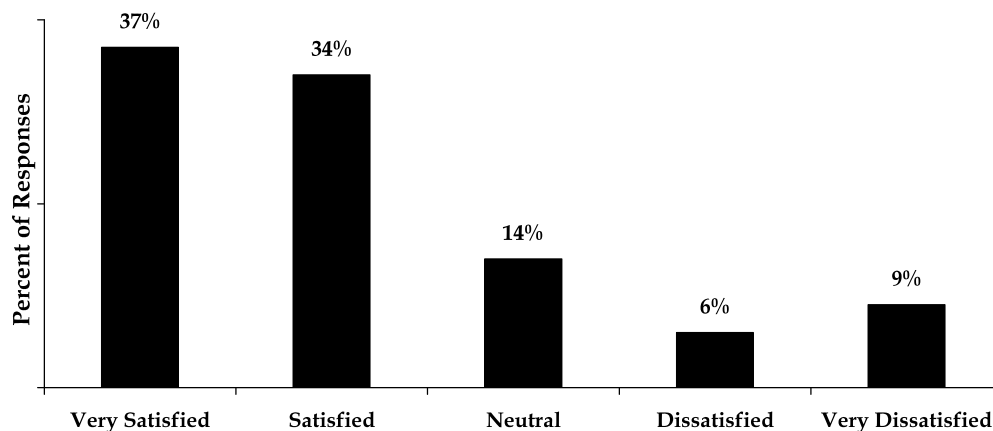
- District stations are the best location for the victim advocates.
- Victim advocates leverage the time of other Police Department staff.
- Roles and use of the advocates vary somewhat across the district stations.
- Spanish-speaking advocates in the Silver Spring and Wheaton stations are essential.
- The Victim Assistance Unit has a strong internal and external customer service focus.

Both Police Department and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff report that coordination between and among the Victim Assistance Unit and DHHS victim services programs has improved tremendously since 2003. Since OLO reported in 2003 that victim service providers needed to improve program coordination, MCPD and DHHS staff at all levels have worked on improving the coordination and collaboration between their respective victim services programs. Staff from both departments report that these efforts have resulted in substantial improvements.

FEEDBACK FROM VICTIM ASSISTANT UNIT CLIENTS

OLO mailed out a written survey to obtain feedback from Victim Assistance Unit clients on overall satisfaction with the Unit, views on the Unit's staff, and the perceived helpfulness of the Unit's services. OLO's survey of 600 crime victims served by the Unit during this past year yielded a relatively low response rate (8.4%), which is consistent with other surveys of crime victims. However, 71% of those who did respond expressed that they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the services received from the Unit. Overall, respondents that reported involvement in violent crime events were most likely to provide favorable feedback.

Chart 4: Level of Satisfaction of Victim Assistance Unit Clients



For a complete copy of OLO-Report 2006-8, go to: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo